

SoulCycle Uses A Freedom Within A Framework Approach To Flourish

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SoulCycle CEO Melanie Whelan uses a freedom within a framework management approach. (Credit: SoulCycle)

SoulCycle, the indoor cycling class phenomenon, started just 10 years ago and has now grown to over 60 studios offering 160,000-plus classes a year. And yet, the company maintains a cult-like customer following inspired by its unique brand ethos. It's managed to do this because of the organization's "freedom within a framework" management approach, says SoulCycle [CEO Melanie Whelan](#) who outlined to me this unique operating philosophy during a recent interview.

"Our instructors are inspirational coaches," Melanie explained. "They create a musical, physical, and spiritual experience." Rather than prescribe the specifics of the SoulCycle experience, the company allows its instructors to lead their classes as they want. It actually encourages them to build "sub-communities" around their classes and their participants.

The open approach to SoulCycle's management style extends to the managers who operate its studios. The company operates with the belief that "the one closest to the rider wins," so it pushes many operating decisions, including responding to riders' communication and resolving problems, down to its studio managers. In fact,

managers are “encouraged to break the rules” in order to serve their guests.

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But the company didn’t grow to be the fitness regime of choice for celebrities as well as tens of thousands of others by leaving its customer experience up to the whims of over 300 instructors and managers. The “framework” part of its freedom within a framework approach is established and reinforced in several ways.

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The company cultivates a company culture centered on 10 core values. These values, identified five years ago, explicitly describe the attitudes and behaviors the company expects from its staff. For example, one value is “A Culture of Yes,” which Melanie explained means that everyone is committed to saying “yes” to riders and doing whatever it takes to satisfy their desires. Another value, “We get dirty,” makes it clear that everyone is expected to do the hard, hands-on work of keeping the studios clean and well-run.



(Photo by Alli Harvey/Getty Images for Spotify)

SoulCycle’s core values are reinforced and brought to life through a “pin program,” in which each staffer is given 10 pins, each representing a core value. They are encouraged to hand them out to colleagues who embody the ideals. Doing so creates, in Melanie’s words, “an ecosystem of celebration of core values.” The pins have become hot items and top collectors have become almost urban legends.

The company also lays out a basic formula for class design and then allows instructors to curate and produce their own workouts and playlists. Its “Soul University” offers 100 proprietary training programs, including many focused on its distinctive culture and service.

Furthermore, SoulCycle's approach to hiring further ensures consistency and alignment throughout the organization. The company hires instructors based on "energy and aptitude, not necessarily experience," Melanie explained. It looks for people, for example, who have a "naturally half full glass attitude in life." By hiring against behavioral principles instead of background, the company is more likely to end up with people who make the same decisions regardless of their role, geography, or tenure.

Melanie says that, because the company's growth depends on "scaling live productions" and not fixed products, it has had to figure out the best way to empower its people. She is convinced that